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DE RUEHSK #0453/01 1170852
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 270852Z APR 06
FM AMEMBASSY MINSK
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4302
INFO RUEHKV/AMEMBASSY KIEV PRIORITY 3274
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PRIORITY 3446
RUEHRA/AMEMBASSY RIGA PRIORITY 1666
RUEHVL/AMEMBASSY VILNIUS PRIORITY 3669
RUEHWR/AMEMBASSY WARSAW PRIORITY 3320
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY
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RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK PRIORITY
RUEHBS/USMISSION USEU PRIORITY 0079

C O N F I D E N T I A L MINSK 000453

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/27/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KWMN](#) [SCUL](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: WOMEN LEADERS READY FOR CHANGE IN BELARUS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR GEORGE KROL FOR REASONS 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) Summary: DCM hosted a luncheon discussion on women's roles in Belarusian society and politics for visiting speaker Darryl Glenney and Belarusian women leaders. While the guests admitted that Belarusian women are involved in the country's political life, they denounced the current women officials as Lukashenko's political puppets. Most went on to claim that Belarus is ready for change, including larger roles for more women leaders, but conceded that some obstacles remain that might obstruct such progress. End Summary.

12. (SBU) On April 11, DCM hosted a luncheon for Belarusian women leaders in honor of the Public Affairs Section's visiting speaker Darryl Glenney. Glenney is a political consultant who has extensive international experience training and preparing women to be political and societal leaders. She has worked with women's organizations in Africa, the Middle East, South America, the Caribbean and Europe.

Current Women Officials Are Political Puppets

13. (C) The guests informed Glenney that Belarusian women are involved in government, but that some of the women currently holding office are viewed as puppets for the regime. Christian Democratic Women's Movement of Belarus Chair Ludmila Petina explained that President Lukashenko at one point declared that 33 percent of all parliamentarians should be women. After the next round of elections, all the women who were invited to run for office by the GOB won a seat in the National Assembly. Other prominent women are Central Election Committee Chair head Lidiya Yermoshina and Presidential Administration deputy Natalya Petkevich - both considered by the political opposition as among the most odious of the regime's officials.

Is Belarus Ready for More Women Leaders?

14. (C) The guests overwhelmingly claimed that Belarus is ready to accept more women leaders in prominent civil society and government positions, including the post of president. Seventh Side grass roots NGO head Olga Karach stated that more women are being elected by their peers to serve as

housing chairpersons for apartment communities. All-Belarusian Women's League Chair Nina Stuzhinskaya claimed that the role of women in Belarus is constantly developing. Furthermore, she stated that men are ready to follow women leaders.

15. (C) Petina concurred that Belarusians would vote for women candidates, but claimed that there are simply no qualified female political candidates. She lamented the lack of trustworthy, qualified public officials, citing Central Election Committee Chair Lidya Yermoshina as a prime example. Petina added that despite Yermoshina, society places more trust in women in general.

16. (C) Belarusian Association of Women Lawyers' Chairwoman Galina Debrezova asserted that Belarusian women are deeply concerned about events and developments in their country. She offered the example of 200 young Belarusian women who traveled from all over the country to listen to a lecture on human rights.

17. (C) Only human rights lawyer Vera Stremkovskaya maintained that Belarus is not ready for change or more women leaders. She cited the recent presidential elections as an example of Belarus' stagnation; she claimed that if the Belarusians were not ready to remove its corrupt leader, they would not be ready to accept a woman president.

Belarus: On the Road to Change, With Bumps Along the Way

18. (C) Ten Plus Coalition member and United Civic Party deputy Ludmila Gryaznova lauded Belarus' post-election demonstrations as examples of the country's progress towards democratic change. She considered the several thousand people who participated in street protests comparable to 100,000 in a free society. She also stated that the mere occurrence of these protests represents a victory in itself. Finally, Gryaznova commented that society views those who were imprisoned for protesting the presidential elections as heroes.

19. (C) Belarusian Association of Journalists deputy director Tatyana Melnichuk concurred that Belarus is on the road to change but must continue to work hard to achieve its goal. She pointed out that civil society remains weak and reluctant to change. She stressed the importance of rejecting "old ways," which do not attract new recruits, especially among the youth. She pointed to the recent explosion of "flash-mobs," which are increasingly popular with youth activists, as a new way to bring about change.

110. (C) Law Initiative Chairwoman Galina Ustinova argued that it is the economy that will bring change to Belarus. She stated that Lukashenko can control elections, but he cannot control the economy. She predicted that only economic decline would be responsible for bringing political change to Belarus.

Comment: Untapped Political Resource

111. (C) These women - smart, motivated, energetic and experienced - to a great extent have been pushed aside by the opposition politicians. However, they are increasingly coming to the realization that they need to take charge of political change themselves. More attentive to the needs and concerns of everyday Belarusians than their male colleagues, they are more capable of winning the trust and attracting the non-political silent majority. The face of the future, and perhaps ultimately successful, Belarusian opposition, could be female.
Krol